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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 003485

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SUBJECT: TFLE01: SYRIA SITREP 02 AS OF 1230 LOCAL, MONDAY,
JULY 17, 2006

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (S) Summary: Initial eyewitness reports estimated that as many as 20,000 Syrians participated in a SARG-orchestrated demonstration July 17 in downtown Damascus. Protesters mainly expressed pro-SARG and pro-Hizballah messages. Separately on July 17, the Syrian MFA's Protocol Director summoned the Charge to protest for the second time in two weeks a lack of security at a demonstration in front of a Syrian diplomatic office in New York. The DAO reported that Syrians are defensively dispersing in and out of garrison areas in case of any Israeli attack. Observed activity did not appear offensive in nature. As a precautionary measure due to the Damascus protest, the U.S. Embassy closed to the public the morning of July 17, with the exception of the ACS Unit, which was fully staffed and functioning. Following an EAC (septel), Embassy personnel were called to work, as needed, for the afternoon. End Summary.

POLITICAL/MILITARY

12. (S) The following were political/military updates:

-- Initial eyewitness reports estimated that between 10,000 to 20,000 Syrians participated in a SARG-orchestrated demonstration July 17 near the Central Bank in downtown Damascus. Some demonstrators carried pro-regime banners and pictures of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, while others waved Hizballah flags, signs and photos of Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Still others displayed pro-Palestinian, "Solidarity with Lebanon," and anti-Israeli messages. There were no obvious anti-U.S. sentiments evident. The demonstration, which was scheduled to begin at 0900, began to break up at 1045 local time, with protesters dispersing gradually. Syrian police effectively prevented a small group of protesters from approaching the Embassy.

-- The Syrian MFA's Director of Protocol, Amir Smadi, summoned the Charge to his office July 17 to protest what he termed a lack of security July 16 during a demonstration in front of "the Syrian Chancery" in New York. (Note: We presume he was referring to a publicized protest by the Coalition for Jewish Concerns that was scheduled to take place in front of the Syrian Mission to the UN in Manhattan, according to a IsraelNationalNews.com report.) This was the second time in two weeks that the MFA has raised the issue of inadequate security at Syrian diplomatic missions with the Charge, but the protocol director did not repeat a previous Syrian assertion that Syrian protection for the U.S. Embassy

in Damascus depended on reciprocal U.S. security for Syrian facilities. Charge promised to look into the matter. Smadi repeated a previous promise that the SARG would issue visas to all Americans crossing from Lebanon into Syria (and lengthen the duration of validity to seven to ten days), including to three TDY consular officers from Embassy Cairo whose services may be required in the event of a large influx of Amcits into Syria.

-- Syria Information Minister Bilal Mohsen said July 16 that the SARG would retaliate immediately to any Israeli attack on Syrian territory "with a firm and direct response whose timing and methods are unlimited," according to an AP report.

-- The Emir of Qatar, Hamad Bin Khalifa al Thani telephoned Asad on July 16 to discuss the Israel-Lebanon conflict and the weekend's meeting of Arab Foreign Ministers in Cairo, according to the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA).

-- Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Imad Mustapha gave an July 16 interview to CNN's Wolf Blitzer, in which he denied that Syria provided military training or equipment to Hizballah. He avoided Blitzer's question about the trans-shipment of materiel from Iran into Lebanon, saying, "This is something for the military intelligence to decide." Mustapha promised that all American citizens without exception could go into Syria regardless of their visa status.

-- Italian PM Romano Prodi spoke with Asad on Saturday, July 15 in the first such high-level contact between the Syrian leader and a Western official since the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri.

-- Syria's Ba'ath Party (in its typical ossified boilerplate

DAMASCUS 00003485 002 OF 002

language) published a communique that stated that "the Syrian people were ready to extend full support to the Lebanese people and their heroic resistance to remain steadfast and confront the barbaric Israeli aggression for its crimes."

-- Syria's Ambassador to London Sami Khiyami said July 14 that Syria wanted to stay out of the conflict between Israel and Lebanon and that it was trying to restrain Hizballah from firing missiles into northern Israel, according to an AP report. Khiyami added that while Hizballah was a "completely independent movement", Syria has "good relations" with it, the AP reported.

-- In conversations over the weekend, PD FSN noted that most of his Syrian contacts blamed Israel and the U.S. for the destruction in Lebanon. A few people blamed Hizballah and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, for provoking the Israelis, but this represented a minority view among intellectuals and ordinary citizens.

-- The DAO reported that Syrians are defensively dispersing in and out of garrison areas as precautionary measures against an increase in tensions with Israel. Observed activity did not appear offensive in nature.

CONSULAR

13. (U) The following are consular updates:

-- Embassy Damascus was closed to the public the morning of July 17, with the exception of the ACS Unit, which was fully staffed and functioning. On July 16, the ACS unit serviced 120 Americans through walk-in service, in addition to phone service.

-- A U.S. family reported that they had successfully departed Lebanon July 15 by road via the Syria crossing of Masna, paying USD 80 in bribes and visa fees. From the Syria-Jordan border, they paid USD 70 for a taxi to Amman, although they noted that others were reportedly paying up to USD 150.

-- Norwegian, Austrian and Swedish diplomats in Damascus reported July 16 that they were bringing their nationals out of Lebanon overland via the Lebanese city of Tripoli to the Syrian city of Homs, with lengthy delays at the border of up to five hours, according to a Canadian diplomat.

ECON/COMMERCIAL

14. (U) The following are Econ/Commercial updates:

-- Most airlines in Damascus are fully booked at least through July 26, and there are reports indicating that flights through early August are filling up quickly.

-- Several regional airlines, including those from Qatar and the Emirates, have arranged extra flights to Damascus to respond to a flood of demands from those fleeing Lebanon.

-- Contrary to a rumor that British Airways would temporarily stop service to Syria, airline officials said they would continue flights. In contrast to normal BA service, however, the July 17 flight was only scheduled to service Syria's northern city of Aleppo, with Damascus passengers being flown up on Syria Air to catch the BA flight. A BA official suggested that the change was for security reasons, but did not elaborate.

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